

# Scottish Place Names as Evidence for Language Change

W.F.H. Nicolaisen<sup>1</sup>

This paper traces several changes in the pronunciation of unaccented final syllables in Scottish place names. It claims that place names which are lexically opaque are more likely to reflect changes in pronunciation earlier than words the lexical meaning of which is well known. As a parallel, the loss of *-l* in words like *ball*, *wall* and *fall* is illustrated by the appearance of continuing usage of *Fal-* spellings in the name *Falkirk* (earlier *Fawkirk*). Even place name spellings tend to be delayed as reflexes of changes in pronunciation; they nevertheless are invaluable evidence for change.

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Although the illustrations for this brief inquiry will be culled from the place-nomenclature of Scotland (both Scottish Gaelic and Scottish English), it is my intention to re-emphasize in principle the special, indeed favorable, status of toponymic evidence in the investigation of language change. The basic assumption underlying such a claim is that, whereas lexical items cannot function properly, i.e. cannot be used competently, without transparent meaning, onomastic items, while of necessity embedded in language for the purposes of communication, function quite satisfactorily, i.e. can be used more or less competently, even when they are completely opaque semantically. Indeed, one might go one step further and say that all items which have crossed the threshold from lexicon to onomasticon function on the basis of their contents only, even if they continue to have fully or partially discernible lexical meaning. It is, however, the category of names which, in the act of naming and in the course of later usage, have become semantically opaque that deserves our special attention. Naturally, this process is particularly common,

if not inevitable, when a subsequent language adopts and adapts names coined by speakers of a previous language but it is not confined to that kind of onomastic contact. I hope to offer a few examples of both situations — bilingual and monolingual.

Why should we have such high expectations of place name evidence, especially when it has cast its lexical moorings and is semantically adrift? In answering this question it is arguable that a lexically meaningless sound sequence which (a) has no connections with the vocabulary of the language in which it is embedded, (b) additionally carries no or little semantic freight and is unencumbered etymologically, and (c) serves denotatively to identify a location as part of the process of creating a structured landscape through naming and the use of names, is much more likely to reflect the onset of impending linguistic changes than items that have easily understood connotations and meanings within a knowable and known lexicon in which they hone each other in various types of semantic fields. This is, of course, not to say that names are single, unconnected items that do not have reciprocal relationships or do not inform each other in onomastic fields; quite the contrary is the case, and it would therefore be ill-advised to rely solely on the evidence of individual names when searching for reflexes of language change, on whatever level.

The changes which I wish to examine are all phonological and mainly affect final consonants in unstressed syllables. The first of these is by no means confined to Scottish or even Northern English but is to be found in all varieties of English at one time or another under the appropriate triggering conditions — the change from a final velar nasal [ŋ] to an alveolar nasal [n], and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Let us take as our starting point the well-known Scottish place name *Stirling* for which no reliable linguistic ascription or acceptable etymology has ever been suggested and which is therefore prototypical as a “meaningless place name.” Its earliest recorded form is *Striuelin* in the early twelfth century, and *-n* endings, with and without a final *-e*, continue strongly until the middle of the sixteenth century in such spellings as *Struelin* and *Striulin*, as well as the most common *Striuelin(e)*, and the like, and, with metathesis, as *Stervlen* and *Styrvelyn*. Parallel to these forms, though much less frequently, we find early *Striueling* and *Strivling*,

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and later the metathesized *Steruelyng*, *Sterling* and *Stirling*. These *-ling* forms have, of course, become dominant and have been used exclusively since the middle of the seventeenth century. This brief list cannot convey more than a glimpse of the variety of spellings displayed in the historical record; nor is it an adequate indicator of the numerical occurrences of the various spellings, some of which are extremely numerous at certain times whereas others occur singly or only occasionally. For the purposes of this particular, very circumscribed investigation, the letters *i* and *y* can be legitimately treated as interchangeable allographs, but this is not to say that their presence and distribution may not yield important information in some other context. Broadly speaking, the picture which emerges is this: almost from the very beginning of the recorded history of the name *Stirling* in the first half of the twelfth century, *-lin* or *-lyn*, *-line* or *-lyne*, and *-ling* or *-lyng* spellings occur side by side although until the fifteenth century the *i*-spellings are much more common than the *y*-spellings. From the fifteenth century onwards, *-ling* or *-lyng* spellings predominate and take over completely from the second half of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century on.

Another Scottish place name whose relevant second element is lexically opaque is *Dunfermline*. For this name, *-lin* or *-lyn* spellings, like *Dunfermelyn* c. 1125 and *Dunfermelin* c. 1126, are by far the most common in the initial three centuries of its recorded history; apart from two puzzling earlier examples, *-ling* does not occur until the beginning of the fifteenth century but then predominates until the middle of the seventeenth century, with the original *-lin* ending petering out about a hundred years earlier. In contrast to *Stirling*, however, *-lin(e)* spellings begin to replace *-ling* spellings again in the middle of the seventeenth century, after a break in continuity of about a hundred years. This curious revival is, however, not relevant to the theme of this discussion.

The essential evidence provided by *Stirling* and *Dunfermline* is corroborated by several other Scottish place names. For *Tealing* in Angus, for example, *-ing* spellings begin to appear in the fifteenth century and take over completely two centuries later. The name *Dupplin* in Perthshire has *-ing* intrusions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; for the name *Roslin* in the Lothians *-ing* is

found in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; for *Dunning* in Perthshire consistent *-ing* spellings begin in the sixteenth, for *Inverkething* in Fife and *Kilwinning* in Ayrshire by and large in the fifteenth century, and so on. The /-n/ > /-ŋ/ phenomenon is, however, not confined to final *-in* becoming *-ing*. For *Longmorn* in Moray, for instance, which contains Gaelic *lann* 'an enclosure,' *Lang-* spellings begin to appear in the sixteenth century; similarly *Lhanbryde*, also in Moray, and *Longannet* in Stirlingshire display *Lang-* as a first element in the same century, in obvious analogy to Scots *lang* 'long,' and there are numerous other illustrations.

What is to be made of this? Purely descriptively, we can say that while *-ing* is a possibility from the twelfth century, it becomes more frequent two hundred years later, reaching its peak in the sixteenth and, especially, the seventeenth century. The many coexistent spellings in *-n* and *-ng*, sometimes in the same document, often in the same source, argue against the possibility of *-n* and *-ng* reflecting different linguistic registers and for an explanation that postulates them as allographs, with one of them assuming the role of allographic norm. Nevertheless, the increasing appearance of *-ng* spellings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in names in which the original spelling and pronunciation had been clearly *-n*, does presuppose an underlying trend from *-n* to *-ng* in pronunciation at times when lexical material is either silent or, at least, not very eloquent on the subject.

Another historical change which is felicitously illustrated by place names and hardly reflected at all in non-onomastic material concerns the loss of the final fricative [x] in what used to be the more easterly Gaelic-speaking parts of Scotland.<sup>3</sup> Although, as usual, the situation is quite complex, in its simplified form this development accounts for the changes of final Gaelic *-ach* (the old Celtic *-acum*) to *-o*, via an intermediate step of *-och*, once the names in question had been adopted by speakers of Scottish English or of Scots. The Angus place name *Aberlemno*, which is *Aberlimenach* in the thirteenth century and is recorded as *Abbyrlemnoch* in 1488, shows *-o* spellings from the fifteenth century onwards. The Fife name *Balmerino*, which is *Balmurinach* and the like from the end of the twelfth century on and shows *-auch* spellings from the following century onwards, is first

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recorded as *Balmurino* in 1423. Another Fife name, *Dunino*, shows *-ach* spellings from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries and *-och* spellings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but is recorded with a final *-o* from 1400 onwards. In these and dozens of other names, *-o* has become permanent whereas there are a few, mostly further west, in which *-o* is only temporary, and *-och* or *-ock* is the modern form (*Kirkintilloch*, *Cumnock*). In general, we can say that in the relevant corpus of names, *-ach* spellings usually belong to the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, *-och* spellings to the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, and *-o* spellings to the fifteenth, sixteenth and later centuries. Since all these spellings are visual representations and, in many instances, are likely to have been copied from earlier written sources, it is difficult to gauge their actual relationship to contemporary pronunciation. Certainly, one has to take into account the delaying factor involved in scribal habits; it is therefore more than probable that changes in pronunciation had occurred already some time before they were reflected in these toponymic spellings; similarly, spellings may have been continued for a while after the pronunciations they represented had already undergone change. The considerable overlaps which are to be found in the written word in that respect are clear indications of this situation, for it is again important to stress that these spellings are not likely to stand for different simultaneous pronunciations being used side by side for a century or more, not even in different socio-onomastic registers.

What our evidence demonstrates very clearly is that change from *-ach* to *-och*, a precondition for the further change to [o:x] and finally to *-o*, is widespread from the fifteenth century onwards although there is some indication that it may have occurred as early as the twelfth and been latent for several hundred years. The difference between the second and third stages, i.e. between [-ox] and [-o:x] is not reflected in the spellings in any obvious way but when *-och* and *-o* spellings occur side by side for a period of time it would be legitimate to assume that both these spellings, at least initially, stand for [o:x]. Even if this problem cannot be resolved in purely visual terms, it is necessary to postulate the intermediate third stage [o:x] in order to reach the final destination [o:] because there is no evidence to suggest that the voiceless velar fricative [x] was ever lost in Scotland after short [ɔ]. Parenthetical-

ly, it is worth pointing out that, on the other hand, certain Scottish place names in a non-Gaelic English context show a loss of [x] after [o:] about the thirteenth century (*Fogo, Kelso, Minto* and *Stobo* in the Border country, all of which contain Old English *hoh* 'a projecting ridge of land'). It must be assumed that the language receiving Gaelic names in *-ach* did therefore at the time of their adoption not have the sequence [o:] + [x] in its phonological structure. This must also have applied to the more north-easterly region where the development [ɔx] > [o:x] > [o:] was mainly triggered in the sixteenth century, probably as the result of a bilingual Scottish Gaelic-Scottish English period or, perhaps more plausibly, of an early post-Gaelic one, periods about which we otherwise know practically nothing in that part of Scotland, regarding the linguistic contacts between Gaelic and Scots.

Let me add briefly that the development in the spelling of Scottish Gaelic locatives in *-aich* (earlier *-aigh*) to *-ie/-y* in Scottish English was along similar lines; that the loss of the final voiceless palatal fricative [ç] appears to have happened more or less at the same time as that of its velar counterpart [x], perhaps even a little earlier since for most eastern Scottish place names now ending in *-ie/-y*, but most probably old dative-locatives in *-aich* (*Cluny, Downie, Logie*), no early spellings displaying a final consonant are on record. On the western seaboard, on the other hand, an ancient name like *Dunollie* in Argyll preserves an *-ich* ending at least until the end of the seventeenth century (*Dunollich* 1688).

A related linguistic development which is, however, usually associated with stressed syllables is the regular loss of post-vocalic *-l* in words such as *ball, hall, wall* which in Scotland become *ba', ha',* and *wa'*, respectively. The resulting vowel has several dialectal allophonic variants from [ɔ:] to [a:]. The toponymic evidence for this phonological change has yet to be fully explored but one of the major place names affected by it, *Falkirk*, has already had a certain amount of detailed treatment.<sup>4</sup> As its early spellings (*Faukirk* 1298, *Fawkirk* 1391) and its modern local pronunciation show, the *-l* in the current official spelling and in the non-local pronunciation is not original to the name, the specific of which is Middle English *fawe, faze* 'variegated, of various colors.' The modern form *Falkirk*, first recorded in the middle of the

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fifteenth century, is undoubtedly a hyper-correct spelling which became possible or suggested itself after the *-l* had been dropped in Scots, i.e. before 1458, the date of the first known *Falkirk* spelling. It is always risky to base a general conclusion on the evidence of one name alone, particularly when the process observed and described works in reverse. In this case, we are, however, on safe ground because the *Faukirk*/*Falkirk* evidence is corroborated by many eastern Scottish place names with the Gaelic element *baile* 'a homestead, etc.' which normally appears Scotticized as *Bal-* but occasionally produced spellings without the *-l*, as in the Aberdeenshire names *Balbithan* (*Bawbethane* 1552), *Balcairn* (*Bawcarne* 1551), and *Balhaggardy* (*Bahagarty* 1551), the Angus names *Balgray* (*Bagra* 1527, *Bawgraw* 1539, *Bowgray* 1559), *Balhall* (*Bahawle* 1548), *Balmirmer* (*Bamirmour* 1387), and *Balwylo* (*Bawillo* 1513; *Bawylo* 1549), and the Fife names *Balcarres* (*Baccarrus* 1589), *Balcaskie* (*Bawcasky* 1480, personal name), *Balcomie* (*Bawcomy* 1537), *Balgonie* (*Bawgouny* 1454), and *Balwearie* (*Bawery* 1497, 1524). Of these, the *Baw*-spellings are especially significant, since they occur in unstressed syllables. Most of the sporadic *-l*-less spellings are, of course, surrounded by many forms in which the *-l* is retained, pointing to a written record and, later, also a cartographic tradition. It is, however, noteworthy that the oral pronunciation asserts itself occasionally for we cannot regard all the *-l*-less spellings as scribal errors. Apart from some early murmurings in 1387 (e.g., *Bamirmour*), such spellings occur between the end of the fifteenth century and the sixteenth century, having been made possible by a change in vernacular pronunciation during the preceding half century or so, as the earliest *Faukirk* spelling suggests. On the basis of the toponymic evidence, one would therefore be inclined to place the change from [fɔ:l] to [fɔ:], [fa:] in that period, not forgetting the delaying factor already mentioned above. Much more material will, however, have to be examined before such a preliminary and tentative conclusion can be confirmed, and caution is still required in its acceptance.

There are, of course, other avenues still to be explored, some of them lexical, some of them morphological, but even the few phonological developments briefly examined here should have demonstrated, in defiance of a blinkered etymological approach

to individual names, the significance of onomastic, in this case toponymic, evidence as signposting guidance to linguistic changes otherwise shrouded in the mists of history, because such changes are barely and certainly less immediately reflected in the lexical material. In view of this realization, a more extensive, if not comprehensive, survey of other potential Scottish candidates for the exploration of early place name spellings as evidence for otherwise completely hidden or sparsely documented linguistic change is certainly called for; there is also no reason why such explorations should be confined to Scotland.

University of Aberdeen

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is a considerably extended and much revised version of a paper first read to the Language Change section of the Modern Language Association at its annual meeting in San Francisco, December 27-30, 1991. This new version is dedicated to Len Ashley who, as an onomastic all-rounder, is not unfamiliar with the intricacies of Scottish place name research.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed treatment, see Nicolaisen, "Spelling."

<sup>3</sup> See Nicolaisen, "Gaelic -ach," "Gaelic Place Names."

<sup>3</sup> See Nicolaisen, "Falkirk" 47-59, *Scottish Place-Names* 7-16.

### Works Cited

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